Vigilante action is unIslamic

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THIS being Ramadan, the Muslims’ fasting month, some Islamic activists in Indonesia have taken it upon themselves to protect the sanctity of the month by attacking restaurants and nightspots to force their managers to close the business. But their actions run counter to the teaching of moderation in Islam.

One such group was the Fron Pembara Islam (Islamic Defenders Front). Like many other groups, it justified its actions using the hadith (saying) from Prophet Muhammad: “Anyone among you sees disobedience to God (munkar), should change it with his hand. If he is not able to, then with his tongue. If he is not able to, then change it in his heart. That is the weakest of faith.”

Alas, however, their understanding of this hadith is wrong. What they did is actually prohibited in Islam. While it is true that Islam encourages Muslims to act against munkar “with the hand”, Islamic ulama would interpret “hand” to denote the authority of the Ulul Amri (the authorities).

Every type of munkar has its own Ulul Amri who can legitimately exercise its authority to change it “with the hand”. For example, for acts of munkar in a family, the Ulul Amri are the father and the mother; those who are not Ulul Amri in that family do not have the authority to prevent munkar with the “hand”. At school, the Ulul Amri is the headmaster.

Different types of Ulul Amri facing different situations have different levels of authority in preventing munkar “with the hand”. For example, although the Ulul Amri of a family are authorised to act against disobedience in their families “with the hand”, they cannot carry out hadd (Islamic penal code) on their families for consuming liquor, because only the rulers of the state have the authority to do that, via the judiciary system.

In social life, offences related to nightclubs and brothels are handled by its Ulul Amri, that is, the rulers responsible for the society.

For those not in positions of authority, the means that they are allowed to use in preventing munkar is to speak against it, and through amar ma’ruf (enjoining good) and nahi munkar (forbidding evil), as well as effective counsel. The means do not include aggression.

A concrete action “with the hand” may only be carried out if they have a specific authority, such as arranging for more acceptable jobs for those who work in nightclubs or brothels.

If the Ulul Amri do not play their part based on the authority they have, and neglect efforts to overcome munkar in society, then individuals and Islamic groups do not have a choice but to commit to preventive efforts by speaking out, and they must work within those limitations.

An aggressive act would not be consistent with the objectives of doing da’wah (Islamic propagation) gently as commanded by Islam.

To sum up: Islam teaches that efforts to enjoin good and forbid evil must observe three precepts.

- Harm is avoided according to one’s capacity to do so.
- Eliminating evil should not cause a worse evil.
- Evil cannot be eliminated with similar evil.

Given these principles in countering munkar, unilateral actions by Islamic vigilantes cannot be condoned. There is no reason for Muslims to ape such behaviour.

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